THE AMERICAN BOY AND THE DIME NOVEL

BY CHARLES M. HARVEY

A ROSY-CHEEKED, country-looking boy, who had just arrived in New York from darkest New Jersey, paused one afternoon in the summer of 1860 in front of what was then known as the Sands Building. New Yorkers who recollect the region in the neighborhood of the "Swamp" will remember the place. Seeing the number, 141 William-st., he climbed the flight of steps, the odors of the drugstore at the corner underneath keeping him company, and timidly entered a large, sunny room on the corner of the second floor, with windows looking out on William and Fulton-sts.

Outside the rail, which ran the full length of the room, stood a large, red-faced, heavy-brown-mustached man, directing several other men who were bundling up little paper-covered books into handy packages which were to be shipped to various parts of the United States. Inside the rail in one corner sat a tall, stoop-shouldered, sandy-haired, sandy-whiskered man, intently examining and marking letters that were spread over the desk in front of him. In the opposite corner a black-haired, black-whiskered, black-eyed man of medium height was writing swiftly. These men were in order Irwin P. Beadle and Erastus F. Beadle, his brother, and Orville J. Victor. The New Jersey youth who had blown into the office of that day was Edward S. Ellis. The two Beadles, with Robert Adams, who was missing from the picture at the instant, were the publishers of the once famous Beadle's dime novels, which were the pioneers in the world's ten-cent fiction field. Mr. Victor was editor of the series. That second-story room at the corner of Fulton and William-sts. was Beadle's headquarters.

UNKNOWN to its proprietors, its agents, or its occupants, Fame in that far-off summer afternoon was getting ready to thrust itself on the Sands Building; for the Jersey youth carried under his coat the manuscript of the most successful dime novel ever written. This novel, which, after the usual ceremonies, passed into the hands of Editor Victor, soon after whirring from the presses by the tens of thousands of copies, to be translated subsequently into many foreign languages, to win its conquering way over a large part of the globe, and to be the greatest financial success ever achieved by the house of Beadle, was "Seth Jones, or the Captive of the Frontier." The author, who, after leaving the manuscript, had hurried timidly from the room, and returned a week later to inquire about the fate of his story, was proud and happy to receive for his book the munificent sum of seventy-five dollars, the customary price for stories of that kind at the time.

The book's introduction to the public, as I remember, was as original as the tale it told. One morning I saw—as hundreds of thousands of other boys in many parts of the country saw at the same time—the words "Seth Jones" staring from fences, dead walls, and wherever else a foothold offered.

Curiosity was increased a few days later when the legend "Who's Seth Jones?" broke out in the same spots in which the name had previously appeared. The mystery was grandly solved, however, when shortly afterward large stacks of little salmon-colored books made their appearance on the newsstands in most of the big cities and little towns in the United States.

How the boys of the sixties swarmed to the newsstands to get this and other stories like it as they fell hot from the press! And how the wild deeds of forest, prairie, and mountain thrilled us as we read the dramatic narratives and graphic descriptions of these unambitious storytellers! Edition after edition of the most popular of these stories was soon exhausted. Over five hundred thousand copies of Ellis's first story were printed before the demand for it ceased. "Seth Jones" was not merely an enormous success in itself, but it created a vogue and firmly established among the boys of America the reputation of a new style of literature.

"SETH JONES" was not, however, the first of the dime novels. It was the eighth of the series, but the most successful of all. "Malaeska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter," was number one of the Beadle novels, and the first dime novel the world ever saw. It came out in the spring of 1860, and was written by Mrs. Ann S. Stephens, an author of wide reputation in her day, and the head of a salon in New York that attracted Irving, Bryant, Fitz-Greene Halleck, Paulding, and other celebrities of half a century ago. Incidentally, Mrs. Stephens connects herself with today by the circumstance that she was the mother of Clara Bloodgood, the actress who committed suicide a few years ago.

Some of the others of the early Beadle tales were: "Massasoit's Daughter," written by Colonel A. J. H. Duganne, the soldier, poet, journalist, and man about town; "The Backwoods Bride," by Mrs. Metta V. Victor, the accomplished wife of the editor of the series; Mrs. Mary A. Denison's "Chip, the Cave Child"; and Harry Cavendish's "Privateer's Cruise." How the memory of these tales and of the enchantment they wrought in the brains of the boys of that day stretches across the years and the decades!

"It has the grip and thrill of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,'" said President Lincoln, in speaking of "Maum Guinea and Her Plantation Children," a story of slave life that appeared in the early days of the Civil War. As a "best seller," "Maum Guinea" stood second to "Seth Jones" among Beadle's publications, and was translated into French, German, and Spanish.

So far as I can recall at this moment,—and at one time and another I have had a wide acquaintance with them,—the only survivor today among all the persons prominently associated with the dime novels in their earlier and greater days,—the days preceding 1866, when one of Beadle's bookkeepers, George Munro, seceded and set up a rival house,—is Mr. Ellis. Mrs. Denison recently died at Normandie Heights in Baltimore, and, although upward of eighty years old, was busy with her pen until almost the end. Orville J. Victor, also more than eighty, died lately at Hoboken, New Jersey. Edward S. Ellis, who is still at home in New Jersey, living at Montclair, is the author of a dozen or two dime novels and several dozen bound volumes of adventure, and many histories and educational works, for which Princeton gave him the degree of Master of Arts. He has lived to see some of his early Beadle books reprinted in bound form.

IT was about 1857 that the Beadles and Adams began publishing ten-cent books on etiquette, letter writing, family medicine, and other subjects that caught the popular fancy, each a complete work. They had already made considerable money out of this enterprise, when they conceived the idea of adding to their list tales of American wild life, of some thirty thousand to thirty-five thousand words each, or about a third or a fourth of the number contained in the ordinary bound volume of fiction. This was the origin of Beadle's dime novels, and Mr. Victor, who had previously edited one or two daily papers and had won a reputation as a writer of biographies and histories, edited the novels from first to last, for about a quarter of a century.

The call of the wild was particularly loud when the Beadles responded to it in 1860 with their little salmon-colored romances. Only a few years had passed since the annexation of Texas and Oregon. The Mexican War and the acquisition of New Mexico and California pushed the country's western boundary from the Sabine and the Rocky Mountains onward to the Rio Grande and the Pacific. In the whole vast expanse west of the States abutting on the Mississippi, there were fewer whites in 1860 than there are now in the new State of Oklahoma. The red man roamed with as much freedom there as he did in the days of Lewis and Clark, and the pressure of the whites upon his lands, and the rifles and powder that the white traders' cupidity gave him, made him a far more belligerent foe, and far more formidable too, than he was when those early explorers met him. Iliads of adventure were enacted along the Santa Fé, the Oregon, and the California trails. No colonists in any other land ever encountered such fierce fighters as were the Sioux, Cheyennes, Comanches, Apaches, and other red raiders of the region for one thousand miles west and southwest of the Missouri River.

It was this realm of romance and adventure that Beadle's writers sought to preempt for themselves. There had been stories of wild life on the frontier written before this. Cooper's Indian tales, the stories of Captain Mayne Reid, Robert Montgomery Bird, and Emerson Bennett, had made the public familiar with the Western hero and his adventures. These were, however, bound volumes, and thus costly, besides being, as the boys thought, pretentious and ostentatious. Beadle's were cheap, democratic, convenient for the pocket. They had an air of camaraderie that the boy liked. They stretched forth the glad hand to him and saluted him with a "May you live long and prosper!" Consequently, for every boy who had ever heard of Cooper, twenty met Mrs. Stephens, Ellis, Colonel Duganne, and their associates, and, meeting them, liked them.

IN the first eight or ten years of their career the more distinctive of the dime novels divided themselves into a few classes only, dealing respectively with the deeds of hunters and trappers, scouts and Indian fighters, settlers and commonwealth builders. When, in 1866, George Munro quit adding up figures for Beadle and Adams, and, with Irwin P. Beadle, who had previously drifted away from his old partners, began publishing "Munro's Ten Cent Novels," he turned out stories of this type chiefly, though with a shriller note and with a lower order of merit.

Ellis's "Bill Biddon" and Thomas C. Harbaugh's "Hidden Lodge" are good specimens of the hunter and trapper tales, the former carrying the reader to the upper Missouri, and the latter leading him into the Adirondacks when they were as isolated as Jacksons Hole in Wyoming is now. Colonel Duganne's "Massasoit's Daughter" gives us Indian fighting and intrigue, and tells something of life on the frontier when the frontier was only a few miles west of Cape Cod and Narragansett Bay. "The White Indian," by Captain J. F. C. Adams, gives us scouting and fighting on the Yellowstone, and shows some of the perils that settlers met in planting homes in the wilderness. In "California Joe's War Trail," Captain Frederick Whittaker describes these perils in a graphic way by taking us to Minnesota in 1862 and showing the havoc wrought by the Sioux under Little Crow in that year, when they attacked New Ulm, Cedar Creek, and other towns, killing dozens of settlers, compelling State troops and United States soldiers under General Pope to be sent against them, and when, out of the many hundreds of Indians captured in the general roundup, thirty-eight were hanged at Mankato for murder.

But with the annihilation of Custer and two hun-

The Wild Deeds of Forest, Prairie, and Mountain Thrilled Us.